



November 18, 2008

## Help from behind the wall

Program gives inmates chance to steer at-risk youth in the right direction

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*The News Journal*

In a prison visiting room, John Miller sat across from Kevin Oropeza confiding his troubles.

The two had never met before, but their troubled backgrounds were enough to create a bond between them: Miller is an at-risk 18-year-old trying to straighten out his life after being arrested on assault charges. Oropeza is a convicted murderer serving a life sentence plus 41 years at Vaughn Correctional Center near Smyrna.

The two met through the Delaware Department of Correction's Project Aware, which matches inmates with troubled youths to try to steer them from worsening behaviors and criminal activity that could land them in prison. The 30-year-old program allows inmates serving life or long-term sentences to talk about their own criminal history, what led them to incarceration and what prison is like.

They also have sit-downs with the youths to try to understand their situations better and in some cases forge a relationship via letters and visits.

"It's cool having somebody to talk to you who's been through the [stuff] you're going through," Miller said. "It's someone you can relate to."

Miller, who participated in Project Aware through his involvement in the youth re-entry program Project Stay Free, said he has people outside prison whom he can open up to but, for some reason, he hasn't.

"I don't really know," he said. Oropeza "just seems to be like the same. Not the same, just is wise about choices I should be making.

"It's totally comfortable talking to him. It's not like he's chained up or I'm chained up. It's just an open conversation," Miller said.

Oropeza, who along with another man was convicted in 1992 of fatally stabbing a Pagan Motorcycle Club member after a day and night of heavy drinking and drug use, said many of the teens who come through the program want to talk to people with whom they identify.

"A counselor could be giving him the same information I'm giving him, but there is mistrust there," Oropeza said. "When they come in here and they are talking to someone who is doing natural life ... that's kind of an eye-opener right there."

What Oropeza said he is doing is identifying feelings he had in the troubled youths. When that happens, they can focus on the source causing the problems -- rather than just talking about the youth's actions.

"We show them that they have to look at their life and what they are doing with it," he said. "Because

you can do something today and be paying for it for the rest of your life."

As the inmates talk to students, counselor and guards watch on.

DOC spokesman John Painter said each member of Project Aware is screened and works with a counselor to help the youths. New members are admitted only after they receive the approval of current members.

"They don't do it for anything," Painter said. "They're not getting good-time credit, they're not getting anything aside from the fact that they know they are helping some people that are starting on the same path they went down."

## 'Just like you'

On a recent morning, about 15 teenagers sat on wooden benches in a large visiting room located at the Vaughn Correctional Center near Smyrna.

Seven inmates wearing white DOC-issued scrubs sat at the other end of the cream-colored room looking at them. Then one inmate got up, walked toward the teens and began his speech.

"Most of us looked like you when we got here," said 44-year-old Kenneth L. Rodgers, who began serving his four life-in-prison terms when he was 27. "Just like you."

Rodgers was one of four men convicted in 1991 of gunning down two Brooks Armored Car guards during a robbery the year before. Another one of his co-defendants, 45-year-old Paul A. Robertson, sat in the front of the room waiting for his turn to speak.

"Don't you want something better for yourselves?" Rodgers asked the teens.

Other inmates took their turns speaking.

Not a single one sugarcoated their life experiences that led them to prison. The inmates talked to them about feelings they had when they thought no one loved them. They told students of the highs their life of crime took them to and the lows that followed their arrests.

Sometimes they yelled. Others times they used profanity. But they were honest with the teenagers on what would happen to them if they didn't start looking for what was causing their problems and talking to someone about it.

This is a message Project Aware participants have been giving youths two to three times a month for the last 30 years.

The inmates shy away from the Scared Straight-style program, because they don't feel it is as effective.

"While there is a little bit of an edge to this program, what they primarily try to do is relate to the people who come in on their terms," Painter said.

Yelling and screaming at the youths would be futile, Oropeza said.

"If I come in here and disrespect him and I scare him, I'm going to shut him down," Oropeza said. "Nobody is going to listen. They're going to be on the defense. So I can't put nothing in there."

While the inmates realize they are not going to save every student they come in contact with, they

say the program is still worth reaching out to those who they can get.

Inmate Keith T. Warren, 34, went through the program in 1989, when he was 15 and in trouble with the law. The program didn't work for him as, three years later, he was convicted of killing a man with a baseball bat during a racial melee outside a Dover night spot.

Warren, however, said it is worth the effort to try to turn lives around by showing them his mistakes.

"I want to relate that message to them that this isn't worth having," Warren said referring to his crime.

"The reality is, we're not going to be able to save all the kids," he said. "Just like in my case, the message went in one ear and out the other. But just one -- just one. Hopefully that one will wake up and go on and do something good with his or her life and give back, too."

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